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AUTHOR Solarz, Andrea
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ABSTRACT

Homelessness is a significant social problem in the United States, with an estimated 2.5 million homeless people in this country today. While criminal activity may become a means for the homeless to obtain resources needed for basic survival, little is known about the level of criminal activity among the homeless or about the types of crimnal activity in which the homeless engage. Although there are many ways in which the criminal behavior of the homeless may be assessed, each has its own methodological problems. Existing research indicates that substantial numbers of the homeless have a history of involvement in the criminal justice system and that the homeless may be overrepresented among certain identified criminal groups. A study was conducted to gather information through self-report and from archival data on a sample of 125 homeless shelter users concerning both their criminal history and their current illegal activity. Interview data were gathered on prior arrests, incarceration history, illegal drug use, and current illegal sources of support. The results revealed a wide range of past and current criminal behavior: as many as 62.4% of the subjects had been arrested for illegal behavior, or admitted to earning current illegal income, and 44.3% of male respondents had a history of incarceration in jail or prison. Criminal behavior appeared to serve various functions among the homeless, and the homeless who engaged in illegal behavior can be classified as chronic criminals, supplemental criminals, criminals out of necessity, substance abusers, or the mentally ill. While the homeless as a whole engage in relatively high levels of illegal activity, for many this is an adaptive response to dealing with severely limited resources. (NB)

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AN EXAMINATION OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR AMONG THE HOMELESS

by

Andrea Solarz, M.A.
Department of Psychology
Michigan State University

CG 019100

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 13-17, 1985, San Diego.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980's, homelessness has emerged as a significant social problem, and it has been estimated that there may be as many as 2.5 million homeless in this country today (Bassuk, 1984). The traditional picture of the homeless may be that of the older "skid row" alcoholic male who is socially isolated from family or friends. During the last ten to fifteen years, however, the characteristics of the homeless have changed. The often romanticized hobos and boxcar adventurers of yesteryear have been replaced by a different picture today; that of the homeless "new poor," deinstitutionalized mental patients, and "street people," The homeless today are younger, are more likely to be experiencing psychiatric problems, and are more likely to be women (often with their children) than were their earlier counterparts.

The homeless are significantly disenfranchised from the centers of power, from economic resources, and from housing. For some, criminal activity may become a means for obtaining resources needed for basic survival. Little is known, however, about the level of criminal activity among the homeless, or about the types of criminal activity in which the homeless engage.

Assessing Criminal Behavior of the Homeless

There are a number of ways in which the criminal behavior of the homeless may be assessed, each with certain methodological problems. For the most part, researchers have relied exclusively on self-reported information obtained from limited or restricted homeless groups (e.g. from shelter guests). That most researchers use these limited samples simply reflects the great difficulties inherent in identifying homeless individuals. The homeless can be found in many different settings. For example, some are on the street, some are in shelters, and some live in condemned buildings or in cars. The numbers of individuals in different subgroups among the homeless are unknown and nearly impossible to determine. Thus, representative sampling

of the population as a whole is a difficult, if not impossible task. It is very important to keep this limitation in mind, however, when generalizing research results about the homeless.

In addition to the sampling problems associated with most studies of the homeless, there may be problems associated with the reliability of the obtained self-report information. Little information is available on the reliability of self-report information obtained from this group, as few researchers have compared self-report information with other official data on criminal history. Robertson, et al. (1985) have reported, however, that a limited sample of 25 homeless women provided more complete information regarding arrest history to the researchers than they did to intake personnel at the shelter where they were staying.

The dynamic nature of this population creates another methodological problem. Those who are homeless generally move in and out of that state; living in a cycle of hotel rooms, shelters, etc. In addition, for a great number, a period of homelessness represents a single lifetime incidence. Once individuals have been identified by researchers as homeless, information on their criminal history is generally retrospective, covering both periods when they were homeless as well as periods when they were domiciled. Thus, it is very difficult to determine from published reports what the level of criminal behavior is during true periods of homelessness versus other periods of time. This is a difficult methodological problem to overcome. One approach is to take identified criminal populations and then determine whether they were homeless or domiciled at the time of their last involvement in the criminal justice system. While this approach makes it possible to assess the incidence of homelessness among certain populations, it excludes individuals whose criminal behavior has not been detected by the system.

Previous Research on Criminal Behavior Among the Homeless

For the most part, criminal behavior of the homeless has received little attention from contemporary researchers. Generally, data have been limited to self-reports of the presence or absence of involvement with the criminal justice system as indicators of past and current criminal activity. While self-report information is often obtained on the use of illegal drugs, data are rarely obtained on involvement in other types of illegal activities. In the next sections, research on criminal history, as well as on current illegal behavior of the homeless will be described.

Criminal History

Typically, researchers studying the homeless limit accounts of criminal behavior of the homeless to reports of whether or not respondents have had contact with the criminal justice system. Research describing arrest and incarceration histories of the homeless is presented below.

Arrests of the Homeless. Several methods have been used to examine arrest histories among the homeless. The first, and most common, is simply to ask interview respondents whether or not they have ever been arrested. A second method is to examine the incidence of homelessness among identified criminal populations, and then to draw some conclusions about criminal behavior of the homeless in general from that sample.

In interview studies, researchers generally report high rates of arrest among the homeless. For example, Robertson, et al. (1985) reported that 52% of a sample of 217 respondents had a history of arrest. Similarly, Fischer (1984) reported an arrest rate of 58% for 51 homeless persons sampled from Baltimore missions.

In an important study examining an identified criminal population, Fischer (1985), reviewed 50,524 adult arrests reported for the city of

Baltimore during 1983. After determining that 634 of the arrests (representing 275 individuals) had been of homeless persons, she made comparisons between homeless and other arrests on a number of factors. It was found that, compared to the entire sample of arrests, fewer of the homeless arrests were for serious offenses. Most arrests of homeless individuals were for relatively trivial offenses and victimless crimes (e.g. violation of park rules, disorderly conduct, etc.). Demographically, the homeless arrestees were generally older, more likely to be white, and more likely to be men than were those in the general population of arrestees.

In another study which focused on the mentally ill in a county jail, Lamb and Grant (1983) examined 101 female jail inmates who had been identified by staff as having psychiatric problems. They reported that 42% of these women had been homeless or living in cheap hotels at the time of their arrest. In a similar study with male inmates, Lamb and Grant (1982) reported that at the time of arrest more than one third of the participants (36%) were living as transients; 25% were living on the streets, on the beach, in their cars, or in missions; and 11% were living in cheap hotels. It was also determined that over half (51%) of those charged with misdemeanors had been homeless or living in cheap hotels at the time of their arrest, as compared to 23% of those who had been charged with felonies.

History of Incarceration. High rates of incarceration have also been reported for homeless persons. In the Robertson, et al. (1985) study, a large majority of a limited sample of 51 homeless persons reported that they had served time in jail (84%), and approximately 15% of this sample indicated that they had served a prison term. Using intake data reported on 8,051 individuals using New York City shelters, Crystal (1984) reported that 21% of the women in the sample, and 44% of the men in the sample revealed that they had served time in prison. In another large study conducted in various urban

and rural sites in Ohio, Roth, et al. (1985) found that 58.5% of the 979 participants reported a history of incarceration in jail and/or prison. Finally, Solarz and Mowbray (1985) reported that 27.8% of a sample of 75 Detroit shelter users said that they had been incarcerated in jail or prison at some time during that previous five years. None of the women in the study reported being incarcerated within this period, compared to 38.8% of the men in the sample.

Current Illegal Behavior

As noted earlier, self-report of current illegal behavior has primarily been restricted to information regarding the use of illegal drugs. Generally, high rates of use have been reported. Solarz and Mowbray (1985) found that 31% of a sample of 75 Detroit shelter users had used marijuana within the past month. Drugs other than marijuana had been used by 11% of all participants during the previous month. In addition, 15% of those in the study reported that they had received treatment for drug problems at some time. For a sample of 202 homeless men and women sampled from Los Angeles missions, soup lines, and outdoor areas, Robertson, et al. (1985) reported that 55% of the respondents indicated that they had used at least one illegal drug more than five times in their lifetime.

In summary, existing research indicates that substantial numbers of the homeless have a history of involvement in the criminal justice system, and that the homeless may be overrepresented among certain identified criminal groups. Little attention has been paid, however, to actual current illegal behavior with the exception of the use of illegal drugs. In this study, information was obtained from a sample of homeless shelter users on their criminal history, as well as on their current illegal activity. In the

sections below, the research methods will be described, followed by a presentation and discussion of the results.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 125 individuals residing at a temporary shelter in a large midwestern city.

The sample consisted of 79 males and 46 females. They had a mean age of 33.4 years, with a range in age of 17 to 72 years. Approximately twenty percent were under the age of 25, while fewer than three percent were over the age of 60. Nearly 80 percent of the participants were Black, with the remaining being White (20.8%) or of another ethnic background (0.8%). The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Participants were randomly sampled from a roster of guests staying at the shelter on interview days. Subjects were paid $2.00 for their participation in the interview. Participation was voluntary.

Measures

Information on criminal behavior and history was gathered both through self report and from archival data sources. Interview data were gathered on number of prior arrests, history of incarceration, use of illegal drugs, and current illegal sources of support. Interview information was also gathered on a number of background and demographic variables including psychiatric history, residential history, and work history.

Self-reported criminal history information was augmented with conviction criminal history information data obtained from the State Police. It should be noted that while this data source appeared to be relatively complete with respect to convictions for felonies which resulted in incarceration, it was deficient in its overall reporting of arrests and misdemeanor conviction data.

Table 1

Summary of Demographic Characteristics

Gender

Males - - - 63.2%
Females - - 36.8%

Race

Black - - - 78.4%
White - - - 20.8%
Other - - - 0.8%

Age

$\overline{X}$ = 33.4 years old (total)

$\overline{X}$ = 33.6 years old (men)
$\overline{X}$ = 33.0 years old (women)

Education

8th grade or less - - 7.3%
Some high school - - 38.7%
High school grad - - 31.5%
Some college - - - - 22.6%

Data on past criminal histories were also obtained through reviews of State Department of Corrections records. For those participants with Michigan prison histories, complete files (i.e. presentence reports, past criminal histories, institutional behavior, etc.) were available on all former inmates who had been on "active" status within the past five years.

RESULTS

In the following sections, information will be presented on past criminal behavior of the participants, followed by a discussion of current illegal activity. Where group comparisons are presented, mean differences were calculated using two-tailed t-tests.

Criminal History

Information will be presented in this section on arrest history, jail history, and prison history. A summary of this information is presented in Table 2.

Arrest History

Information on arrest history was generally obtained from self-report data. Self-report data were supplemented by archival data where archival data indicated additional arrests.

Results indicate that just over half (53.6%) of all participants had a history of prior arrest. A significantly greater proportion of men (67.1%) than women (30.4%) had a history of arrest ($p < .01$). This compares to estimated individual arrest histories of approximately 22% for men and six percent for women nationally (McGarrell and Flanagan, 1985). The average age of first adult arrest (age 17 or older in this state) was 22 years old, with a range in age from 17 to 41. The majority of those with adult arrest histories had their first arrest before the age of 21 (57.8%). Those with arrest histories reported a mean of 5.3 prior arrests, with 60.9% reporting three or fewer

Table 2

Summary of Official Criminal Histories

Arrest History - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 53.6%

Males - - - - - - - - - 67.1%
Females - - - - - - - - 30.4%

Jail History - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 26.4%

Males - - - - - - - - - 40.5%
Females - - - - - - - - 4.3%

Prison History - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 13.6%

Males - - - - - - - - - 21.5%
Females - - - - - - - - 0.0%

prior arrests. Of those with an arrest history, 45.9% reported that they had been arrested within the past year. This represents 18.4% of the total sample, or 19.0% of men and 17.4% of women.

Jail History

Data on jail history were obtained both from self report and from official records.

Over a quarter (26.4%) of all participants in the study had served a jail sentence. (This did not include time spent in jail awaiting trial or sentencing.) Nearly all (97.0%) of these individuals were men; in fact, only two of the women in the study had served time in jail. Thus, a total of 40.5% of the men had served time in jail, compared to only 4.3% of the women in the study (difference statistically significant at $p < .001$). Those with prior jail histories had served an average of two prior terms, with a range from one to nine prior jail terms. Nearly half (48.5%) of those with a jail history had served only one jail term, and only 15.1% had served more than two terms.

The majority of offenses for which respondents had received jail sentences were non-assaultive or property crimes. Fewer than twenty percent of those with a jail history (or 4.8% of all of the participants) had been convicted of violent or assaultive offenses such as assault, armed robbery, or weapons offenses. The largest number of jail sentences were for property theft. Over half (51.5%) of those with a jail history (or 13.6% of the total sample) had received a sentence for breaking and entering, larceny in a building, receiving and concealing stolen property, or other such offenses. A summary of conviction offenses for which respondents received jail sentences is presented in Table 3.

While the majority of those with jail histories (54.8%) had served those terms five or more years previously, 12.1% had been released from jail within

Table 3

Percentages of Participants with Jail History Who Served Jail Terms for Specified Offenses

(n = 33)

Burglary offenses (breaking and entering, larceny in building, receiving and concealing, auto theft, etc.)	51.5%
Assaultive offenses (assault, A&B, Armed robbery, weapons, etc.)	18.2%
Drug offenses	15.2%
Forgery (includes uttering and publishing, false pretenses, etc.)	15.2%
Destruction of property	6.1%
Miscellaneous offenses (contempt of court, disorderly conduct, driving under the influence, non-payment of child support, etc.)	39.4%

the past year. Most (69.7%) had served a total of six months or less in jail aggregated across all jail terms. Approximately twelve percent of those who had served jail terms had spent more than a total of a year serving their jail sentences.

Prison History

A total of 13.6% of the participants in the study had a prior history of incarceration in prison. All of these individuals were men. Thus, a total of 21.5% of the men in the study had a prison history. Those with a prison history had received prison sentences for an average of 2.2 offenses, and had been to prison an average of 1.8 times. Nearly half (47.1%) had been in prison more than once, with a range of one to four incarcerations.

A surprisingly high number of those with a prison history had been convicted of murder (23.5%). This represents 5.1% of the men in the sample, or 3.2% of the entire sample. Approximately half of those with a prison history (52.9%) had served prison terms for property theft convictions (breaking and entering, UDAA, receiving and concealing stolen property, etc.). A summary of the offenses for which participants received prison sentences is presented in Table 4.

Nearly a third of those with prison histories (31.3%) had been released from prison within the past year. Half had been released between five and ten years previously, and 18.8% had been released from prison between ten and twenty years previously. A quarter of those with a prison history were on parole at the time they were contacted. It was subsequently learned after reviewing prison files that another participant had escaped from a corrections center, and was actually on inmate status at the time he was interviewed. Thus, a total of 29.4% of those with a prison history were on parolee or inmate status at the time of the study. This represents four percent of the total sample, or 6.3% of the men in the study.

Table 4

Percentages of Participants with Prison History Who Served Prison Terms for Specified Offenses

(n = 17)

Burglary (breaking and entering, larceny in building, receiving and concealing, auto theft, etc.)	52.9%
Murder	23.5%
Assault, rape	17.6%
Robbery (armed robbery, larceny from person, etc.)	17.6%
Drug offenses	17.6%
Miscellaneous (violation of probation, possession stolen mail, CCW, etc.)	23.5%

Just over half of those with a prison history (52.9%) had served a total of five or fewer years in prison. However, 29.4% had served ten or more years, with 11.8% having served more than fifteen years in prison.

Current Criminal Behavior

Substance Abuse

A substantial majority of participants (78.4%) in the study admitted to using marijuana at some time. Of those, 62.2% (or 49.6% of the sample) had smoked marijuana during the previous month. Nearly a third (32.7%) of those who had used marijuana reported that they had smoked it at least weekly during the previous month. Thus, a quarter of all participants (25.6%) had used marijuana at least weekly during the last month.

A large minority of the participants (42.7%) reported that they had at some time used illegal drugs other than marijuana, such as heroin, cocaine, or LSD. However, fewer than a quarter of those (22.6%) indicated that they had used any of these types of drugs within the past month. Thus, only 9.6% of the respondents claimed that they had used illegal drugs other than marijuana during the previous month.

Overall, 79.2% of the respondents reported that they had used illegal drugs at some time. Men were statistically significantly more likely to report having a history of illegal drug use than were women (83.6% versus 71.7%; $p < .01$)

Illegal Income

Sixteen percent of the respondents indicated that they had some source of illegal income during the previous six months. Over twenty percent of the men (20.3%) compared to less than ten percent of the women (8.7%) reported some illegal income. (This difference was not, however, statistically significant.) While participants were not asked directly the source of their illegal income, many of the respondents volunteered this information. Illegal sources

of income included selling controlled substances (including prescribed medicines), shoplifting for personal needs, stealing items in order to sell them, and leaving restaurants without paying for meals. Drug trafficking was the most commonly mentioned source of illegal income.

For 8.8% of the participants, their main source of income during the past month was illegal. Over ten percent of the men in the sample (11.4%) reported that their main source of income during the previous month was illegal, compared to 4.3% of the women (not statistically significant).

Panhandling, illegal in some jurisdictions, was reported as a source of income during the past six months by 11.2% of the participants. While panhandling was a source of income for 17.7% of the men, no women reported that they had panhandled during the past six months (difference significant at $p < .001$). Few of the men (3.8%), however, indicated that panhandling had been their primary source of income during the previous month.

In total, over a third of the men in the sample (35.4%) reported earning money during the past six months from panhandling and/or illegal income. This represents 25.6% of the entire sample.

Welfare Abuse

Nearly half (45.6%) of the participants in the study reported that they had received money from public assistance (i.e welfare or AFDC) during the previous six months. According to regulations, there are substantial restrictions on the amount of income that one may earn if receiving public assistance, and it is required that earned monies be reported to the appropriate agency in order that subsequent benefit adjustments may be made. In the state where the study was conducted, welfare payments for single persons generally consist of a shelter allowance of approximately $150.00 to $170.00, $70.00 worth of food stamps, and less than $20.00 for personal needs and all

other expenses. Because of the low level of public assistance payments, some recipients resort to earning income through other means in order to supplement these funds. This income is generally not subsequently reported to social service agencies.

The numbers of respondents in this study reporting that they received income during the past six months both through public assistance and from working gives a rough estimate of the maximum percentages who may have "abused" welfare. In this study, 35.5% of those who received public assistance during the previous six months also indicated that they had earned money from working during that time. This represents 17.6% of all those in the study.

Reliability of Information

A concern sometimes voiced by those providing services to the homeless, as well as by researchers, is whether or not information obtained from homeless persons is reliable. In order to assess the reliability of self-report information obtained in this study, comparisons were made between self-report responses and archival data.

Results indicate that the most complete source of information about criminal history was obtained from the respondents themselves. Overall, 95.5% of the participants who were determined to have an arrest history from a combination of self-report and archival sources, reported that they did indeed have a history of arrest. On the other hand, archival data (i.e., State Police conviction registers and Department of Corrections prison records) revealed only 46.3% of the total number of those determined to have a history of arrest.

The obtained self-report information on jail histories was less accurate, with 66.7% of the respondents with jail histories (as calculated from a combination of official and self-report information) indicating that they had

been to jail. It is believed that this discrepancy is due primarily to confusion on the part of some of the interviewers in differentiating between a jail "term" and time spent in jail awaiting disposition or sentencing. Thus, in some cases the participants reported having spent time in jail, but this information was not coded because the interviewer incorrectly determined that the incarceration did not meet the criteria of a "jail term." It is believed that criminal history information was problematic only with respect to jail data. Reviews of official records revealed 78.8% of the total jail histories.

Review of Department of Corrections prison records indicated that all Michigan prison histories had been reported by the respondents. However, because a number of respondents had served prison terms only in other states, review of Department of Corrections files revealed only 88.2% of the total reported prison histories.

In summary, this self-report information appears to be a reliable indicator of the presence or absence of arrest and incarceration histories. Information was likely less accurate with respect to the total number of involvements in the criminal justice system (e.g. total number of arrests or jail terms), particularly for those with very extensive or complicated criminal histories.

DISCUSSION

This study is limited to the extent that complete data were generally not available on arrests and convictions for minor offenses. Nonetheless, the participants in this study exhibited a wide range of past and current criminal behavior. As many as 62.4% had been arrested in the past for illegal behavior, or admitted to earning current illegal income, and close to half (44.3%) of the men in the sample had a history of incarceration in jail or prison. A perfunctory analysis of these data might indicate that the homeless

are primarily chronic criminals who participate in extensive illegal behavior. However, examination of the criminal behavior of the participants in this study reveals a number of different relationships between homelessness and criminal behavior.

For some of the homeless in this study, engagement in illegal behavior was closely related to a state of poverty and limited access to resources. For example, while living on the streets after eviction from a shelter, one man reported that he had been leaving restaurants without paying for his meals. He added, however, that he was keeping a list of these establishments, along with the dates when he had eaten there, so that he might pay for those meals at a later time. Another older gentleman had spent six months living in abandoned buildings, moving on to another whenever his presence was detected. Finally, he came to a shelter for help. Several participants in the study reported that they had spent time living in wooded areas within the city, sometimes shoplifting food in order to eat. Another young man had been breaking into cars on a used car lot in order to have a place to sleep off of the street.

For a smaller group of the participants, criminal activity appeared to reflect a deviant lifestyle of which a state of homelessness may simply have been an incidental aspect. Prison files revealed that some of the participants had long term transient and unstable lifestyles; moving between periods of incarceration and domiciliation in cheap hotels and rooming houses. One former inmate reported that during a period while he was on escapee status he "lived some of everywhere but nowhere in particular." Several participants were also known to have warrants out for their arrest at the time they were interviewed, or within a short time thereafter. The reasons for the issuance of warrants were varied. For example, one participant had escaped from a

correctional center, one parolee had not reported a change of residence to his parole officer, another individual had been charged with assault of his mother, and another had been charged with breaking and entering.

For some five percent of the participants in this study, release from incarceration appears to have precipitated their homelessness. For example, one gentleman became homeless after his seventeen year old first degree murder conviction was overturned upon appeal, and he was released outright from prison. Another young man became homeless after his parole officer determined that the hotel room in which he was living was problematic because of a high level of drug traffic and other illegal activity in the building. After a short stay with his mother did not work out, this young man went to a shelter. Others simply had no established housing upon their release from incarceration, or the housing situation to which they were released was inadequate or did not work out because of interpersonal conflicts.

Thus, criminal behavior appears to serve a number of functions among the homeless. In general, the homeless who engage in illegal behavior may be grouped into the following categories:

1. **Chronic criminals** - These individuals may have an extensive history of arrests and convictions for illegal behavior. Their current illegal activity may consist, for example, of selling drugs on a large scale, armed robberies, extensive assaultive behavior, or repeated burglaries. For example, one participant in the study said that he had stolen over $500 worth of silk dresses which he planned to sell to his regular "fence." Another man had an extensive incarceration history consisting of three terms in prison and nine jail terms (in fact he was an escapee at the time of his interview). Nearly all of his convictions were for larcenies. Illegal behavior is generally the main source of support for these individuals, and may in fact be

thought of as "employment" by them. Very few of the participants in this study can be placed in this category.

2. **Supplementing criminals** - For many of those in the study, illegal behavior was used to supplement existing sources of income. The meager income provided by public assistance, or by part-time or sporadic employment, is often not adequate to provide for shelter, food, and personal needs. Thus, some resort to low levels of criminal behavior to provide small amounts of additional income or resources. Included in this group are those who illegally supplement welfare payments with work income, those who deal in small amounts of drugs or who sell some of their own prescription medicines, and those who occasionally supplement existing resources by shoplifting food or personal use items. Most of the criminal behavior of those in this study likely falls into this category.

3. **Criminals out of necessity** - For those who are truly homeless or who find themselves temporarily without shelter or any source of income, criminal activity may become an adaptive behavior necessary for survival. For this group, engaging in illegal behavior is directly related to their state of homelessness. In this study, participants reported breaking into cars in order to obtain shelter for the night, eating in restaurants and then leaving without paying for their meal, living in abandoned buildings (i.e., trespassing or breaking and entering), shoplifting food, and living out-of-doors in public parks or wooded areas. For those who spend significant amounts of time on the streets or going from shelter to shelter, this type of behavior is likely quite common. Over a quarter of those in this study (28.0%) had spent the night before coming to the shelter on the street (includes in the woods or in a car) or in another shelter. Most of them reported engaging in these kinds of behaviors.

4. **Substance abusers** - A significant portion of those in the study reported current use of illegal drugs. This was likely the most common type of illegal behavior reported by respondents. Within the inner city milieu, this may not be considered deviant behavior, and it is certainly not restricted to the homeless. Those whose criminal behavior is related to alcohol abuse (e.g., public drunkenness or drinking in public) may also be included among this group of offenders.

5. **Mentally ill** - As Fischer (1985) notes, for some of the homeless, bizarre behavior symptomatic of psychological problems may result in intervention by law enforcement officials leading to incarceration instead of to sometimes more appropriate social services or treatment. This may include psychotic behavior (sometimes including assaultive behavior), or other disorderly conduct. In this study, 32.0% of the participants had a prior history of psychiatric institutionalization. For the most part, they did not exhibit overtly bizarre behavior during the period that they were in the shelter. However, several did indicate that behavior related to their mental illness had occasionally led to intervention from the police. Overall, this probably does not represent a significant portion of illegal behavior among the homeless. Note that for the participants in this study, history of psychiatric hospitalization was <u>not</u> statistically related to having arrest, jail, or prison histories.

The above categories are not necessarily independent. Individuals may move among the first three categories of criminal behavior as their circumstances change. Illegal behavior related to substance abuse and mental illness clearly may overlap with all other categories. In addition, these categories may not be completely inclusive; for example some assaultive behaviors do not fit neatly into any one group. However, these categories do

encompass the great majority of illegal behaviors that may be more specific to the homeless than to other groups.

Clearly, there are many patterns of illegal behavior among the homeless. This has implications for how criminal behavior among this population may be dealt with and effectively controlled. For many of the homeless, participation in illegal activity serves as an alternative avenue of access to basic resources. Criminal behavior may thus be used to meet needs which existing social services are not adequately addressing. In order to reduce this type of behavior, system level changes may be necessary to create accessible alternatives for meeting basic needs.

The homeless are a heterogeneous group with a varied set of problems. Consequently, there is no single point from which their problems may be addressed. It appears therefore that multi-disciplinary approaches to dealing with the social problem of homelessness have the greatest likelihood of achieving some success. The importance of input from mental health, public health, and social service agencies in addressing problems of the homeless is evident. It should also be recognized, however, that the criminal justice system encounters the homeless at a number of levels. Special attention should be paid to the homeless at the levels of the police, courts, and penal institutions. Particularly in urban areas where homelessness is most acute, police may frequently be faced with decisions on how to deal most effectively with homeless individuals, many of whom also suffer from substance addiction or mental illness. Dealing with these individuals on the street requires an awareness of the special problems of the homeless, and a thorough knowledge of available social services. At the court level, diversion into vocational rehabilitation or substance abuse treatment programs, along with the provision of aid in obtaining stable housing, may be appropriate alternatives to incarceration for certain offenders. Finally, at the institutional level, it is

important that appropriate housing be established and confirmed at the point of release, particularly for those with an unstable residential history. Release of individuals without financial resources from incarceration to shelters or other unstable living settings may greatly increase the likelihood that they will recidivate.

In summary, while the homeless as a whole engage in relatively high levels of illegal activity, for many this is an adaptive response to dealing with severely limited resources. It is suggested that particular attention be paid by the criminal justice system to addressing the needs of this quickly growing group.

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